

# The Cultural Work of Sejong the Great

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## The Invention of the Alphabet II

It seems that Sejong's alphabet plans had found major opposition among the senior officials, including some even in the Hall of the Wise. In fact, Sejong had found it necessary to go around the Hall and locate the phonological research project in the Office of Deliberation. The academic attack was led by Ch'oe Malli, who had also been a prominent opponent of the proposed administrative role for the crown prince. Ch'oe at that time occupied the highest research position in the Hall. From his long protest memorial, sent to the king early on March 5, 1444, we can see that he was basically an elitist who believed that literacy meant Chinese literacy and should be the privilege of the ruling class. To him, a phonetic script was a "bar-

barian matter" and not something a cultured country should have. He protested against using the "unattested" alphabet to "lightly revise the rime books already perfected by the ancients." He thought that mass literacy would destabilize Korea's social order, and he was skeptical that accurate transcription of trial testimony could bring any improvement in the quality of justice. He complained that Sejong had acted precipitously, without consulting his high officials, and lamented that the king was spending so much time on such things when he should be attending to the real business of government, and that even the crown prince was being diverted from his absorption in "the learning of the sages."

Sejong was clearly angered by these arguments. He summoned Ch'oe Malli and the six academicians who had joined in his protest and point by point demonstrated the errors in their thinking. "How," he wondered as he looked over Ch'oe's memorial, "can these words be the informed and reasoned words of Confucian men? What utterly useless, commonplace Confucian men!" Although the king had his way, the views voiced by Ch'oe were widely held in officialdom and in the upper class, and would have a significant effect on the early history of the alphabet.

During the following two years, the phonological research went forward, the alphabet was refined, and various orthographical problems were confronted. But the most valuable product of this period was a thorough theoretical defense of the script, carefully conceived on Confucian principles and based on a highly sophisticated understanding of phonetic articulation. It was entitled "The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People, with Explanations and Examples" (*Hunmin chŏngŭm haerye*). This was the commentary mentioned earlier, the long-lost text of which was found in the old house in Andong in 1940.

Among the many fascinating details in this doc-

ument is an explanation of the shapes of the letters. The seventeen consonants are classified according to the five basic categories established by Chinese phonologists during the eleventh century. These were velars, dentals, labials, alveolars, and laryngals. The letters for the velar sounds *k* and *k'* were based on an upper-right angular shape which was said to represent the outline of a tongue pressed against the soft palate, where these consonants were articulated. The dental letters *n*, *t*, and *t'* were based on a lower-left angle, representing the outline of the tip of the tongue touching the gum in back of the teeth. The labial letters for *m*, *p*, and *p'* were built on a square, representing the mouth and lips. The graphs for alveolar sounds *s*, *z*, *ch*, and *ch'* were based on the shape of an inverted "v", said to represent the incisor teeth which are clearly visible during articulation of these sounds (the Chinese name for this category was "incisor sounds"). Finally, the laryngeal letters for *h*, and the glottal stop, etc., were based on a circle, representing the larynx.

Vocalization was analyzed in a three-part scheme, front vowels symbolized by vertical line, mid-vowels by a horizontal line, and back vowels by a thick dot. The eleven individual vowel signs and fifteen diphthong combinations were then constructed using various combinations of these three strokes.